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International research students' experiences of feedback

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Supervising international research students has drawn increasing attention in recent years, but inadequate research has been conducted to examine their experiences of the feedback from their supervisors and its impact on the thesis-writing process. This paper seeks to fill the gap and contribute to understanding international research students' feedback experiences in postgraduate research supervision. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with a small group of international research students from non-English speaking backgrounds at an Australian university. The interviewees reported a wide range of both positive and negative experiences with supervisory feedback, which reflects their unique pedagogical needs in the thesis-writing process. The students' voices revealed through this study will have significant implications for enhancing postgraduate research supervision with international research students.

Key words: feedback, postgraduate supervision, international students

Introduction

Feedback is central to all learning as "action without feedback is completely unproductive for a learner" (Laurillard, 1993, p. 61). The provision of guidance and feedback to students has long been acknowledged as an indispensible part of an effective teaching-learning environment in higher education (Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell & Litjens, 2008). Feedback to research students is a vital aspect with multifaceted functions in postgraduate research supervision. However, "providing feedback which combines thoroughness and sensitivity, and which is necessarily critical, analytical and evaluative, is a difficult balancing act" (Knowles, 1999, p. 113). In the process of researching and writing up a thesis, research students need to engage constantly in intellectual and academic exchanges with their supervisors, in order to receive input and guidance about their research progress and thesis writing. Hence, the feedback process lies at the heart of a research student's learning experience.

International students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) are faced with various challenges in their postgraduate research. Their educational, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds may present difficulties in their socialisation process of coming to terms with the expectations, writing requirements and academic culture of Western universities (Cadman, 1997; Woodward-Kron, 2007). This paper has drawn on data from a larger research project to investigate the issues, complexities and challenges of international research students in their postgraduate research and thesis-writing process (Wang & Li, 2008). It focuses on the students' experiences and perceptions of guidance and feedback from their supervisors. To

address the issue of student 'silence' about the research experience (e.g., Devenish et al., 2009; McAlpine & Norton, 2006), this paper reveals the 'silent voices' of international research students regarding the impact of supervisory feedback on their thesis writing and academic development in postgraduate research. It seeks to contribute to enhancing the practice of feedback to international research students, and thus enhancing their overall research and thesis writing experiences.

Literature review

The provision of intellectual and research guidance and feedback is an essential feature of postgraduate research supervision. Feedback from supervisors helps to induct the research student into the academic discourse community by helping them to become an independent academic researcher (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000). In a qualitative study, Kumar & Stracke (2007) looked at the written feedback on a PhD thesis in terms of three fundamental functions of speech: referential, directive and expressive. Expressive feedback, which consisted of praise, criticism and supervisor's opinion, was perceived by the student to be the most beneficial. The supervisor and student engage in dialogic exchanges which encourage the student to reflect upon and address the supervisor's concerns and thoughts. This study highlights the pedagogical role of feedback in postgraduate research supervision.

Feedback in postgraduate research is a social practice embedded in supervisory relationships. This demands attention not only to *what*, i.e. the text, but also to *how*, i.e. the way in which feedback is given and received. Research has shown that the way feedback is given might suggest or create a different relationship between tutor and student (Mutch, 2003), and feedback is received within the context of an implicit understanding of the power relationship (Hyland, 2000). For example, in Kumar & Stracke's (2007) study, the relationship is best represented in a peer-to-peer model. In other studies, the power relationship is less equal, with the teacher adopting a primarily instructive and directive role (e.g., Hyatt, 2005; Hyland, 2000). In postgraduate supervision, the students' cultural backgrounds, prior learning experiences, academic competence and research capacity may influence the power relationship between the supervisor and supervisee in the feedback process.

Previous research suggests that receiving critical feedback can be emotionally difficult for writers (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Fiske, 1992; Lamott, 1994). In some circumstances, feedback may be counterproductive and damaging to students' self-esteem, thus negatively affecting learning outcomes (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). Young (2000) looked at students' responses to positive and negative feedback and found that students with higher self-esteem held a positive attitude to being assessed and receiving criticism, while students with lower self-esteem would tend to perceive comments intended to be positive as negative. Young (2000, p. 414) argues that:

> *"one of the most powerful and potentially dangerous dimensions of students' feelings about feedback is the extent it impacts on themselves as people."*

Caffarella & Barnett (2000) also highlight the importance of attending to the psychological factors involved in the feedback process and the students' emotional responses to feedback. Feedback to international students in postgraduate research involves complex issues and needs to be considered holistically. The culturally-embedded supervisory relationship between supervisors and students from diverse cultural backgrounds presents challenges in the feedback process. These students encounter the challenges of writing in their second

language, facing induction into a new culture and a new discourse community with expectations and conventions quite different from their previous learning experiences (Cadman, 1997, 2000; Hyland, 2000; Ryan & Zuber-Skerritt, 1999; Wang & Li, 2008). They may therefore have particular pedagogical needs in their postgraduate supervision and feedback practice. Without a good understanding of their pedagogical needs, the practice of feedback would possibly lead to miscommunication, frustration, and tension.

Despite the crucial role of feedback in the postgraduate research process, feedback practice is a relatively under-researched area, especially in terms of supervising international research students from non-English speaking backgrounds. In the current literature on feedback, emphasis is placed primarily on *what* rather than *how*; i.e., what type of feedback is given rather than how it is given and received. The methodology relies mainly on text analysis (e.g., Hyatt, 2005) or discourse analysis (e.g., Kumar & Stracke, 2007). Inadequate research has been undertaken to look into the feedback process and how students perceive, feel about and react to feedback. The tendency to examine the 'what' in feedback practice leads to a focus on the informational function, while ignoring the pedagogical role of feedback as viewed from the students' perspective. To make the feedback process a facilitative, encouraging and stimulating learning experience, there is a need to investigate students' perception of feedback and its impact on their research process. Insights into students' feedback experiences will enhance the effectiveness of feedback practice in postgraduate research supervision.

Research methodology

Qualitative research methods are appropriate when seeking the reactions and perceptions of individuals who are experiencing a particular phenomenon. Our intent was to allow students' voices to emerge, an approach best suited to qualitative methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A qualitative approach in gathering data was adopted in this study in order to capture the richness of individual thesis writing and feedback experiences. In this context, interviews can be effectively employed to understand students' individual experiences and to suggest useful explanations or interpretations of collected qualitative data (Krathwohl, 1997).

The sample group of this study consisted of eleven NESB international research students enrolled in higher degree research programs at one Australian university in 2007. Eight PhD students, two Professional Doctorate students and one Masters by Research student participated in this study (4 males and 7 females). Seven participants were in their 30s and 40s and the other four were under 30 years old. Participants were from six countries (Thailand, China, Malaysia, India, Maldives, and Bahrain). They were at various stages of their doctoral or masters candidature: four had presented their initial seminars and had their research proposals approved; four were in the process of writing theses draft chapters; three had completed and submitted their theses. Their research areas included education (3), information science (3), law (1), management (1), economics (1), communication (1), and tourism (1).

A 40–60 minute semi-structured face-to-face interview was conducted with each of the participants. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. To safeguard the identities of participants, code numbers rather than names appeared on the interview transcripts and report of the research project. The transcript of each interview was given to the interviewee for validation. Dependability in this study involves respondent validation and debriefing by co-researchers. The transcripts were coded, based on emergent themes and categories.

The responses were sorted into conceptual categories on the basis of similarities and differences. The analytical process was iterative and data analysis involved a number of readings of transcripts and progressive refining of emerging categories. We, as co-researchers, analysed the data independently before comparing our notes, discussing and reaching consensus on emergent themes.

Findings and discussion

The interviewees reported a wide range of feedback experiences. Two dominant patterns emerged from the data analysis: frustrated/uncertain tendency and inspired/confident tendency. It should be noted that all respondents may have experienced various emotional responses under different circumstances and at various stages of their candidature. The grouping of students along a continuum was based on the strongest tendency revealed from their responses and overall attitude towards feedback (see Table 1).

Table 1: Two tendencies of feedback experience

Feedback experience	Frustrated/uncertain F2, F5, M1 M3, F3, F7	Inspired/confident F1, F6 M4, M2, F4
Dominant feeling	Confused, frustrated, uncertain, concerned	Reflective, inspired, confident, determined
Overall attitude	Reactive	Proactive
Self-esteem	Low	High
Academic competence	Low	High
Supervisory relationship	Apprentice/Master	Mentored/Mentor
Pedagogical need	Tell me what to do	Guide me through it
	Demand explicit and directive feedback	Seek guidance and inspiration
	Follow the instruction	Engage in critical conversations

The students' feedback experiences ranged from feeling frustrated/uncertain to feeling inspired/confident. Three students (F2, F5, and M1) reported the most frustrating experiences. They used expressions like 'frustrated', 'upset', and 'stressed'. At the time of interview, they were at the thesis writing up or completion stage. Two students had extended their PhD studies to five years. Three students (M3, F3, and F7), who were at the early stage of their research, viewed the feedback as 'tough' and felt 'confused' sometimes. A strong sense of uncertainty was embedded in their responses. Five students (M4, M2, F4, F1, and F6) reported primarily positive experiences. At the time of interview, three were at the writing-up stage and two had just completed their theses. These students completed their research on time. In the following section, in order to highlight the findings, students' voices concerning the feedback process are reflected in representative quotations taken from their interviews.

Frustrated/uncertain tendency: Tell me what to do!

The tendency of feeling frustrated and uncertain was typically represented by three students (F2, F5, and M1). They tended to have low self-esteem and academic competence. They adopted a reactive attitude towards feedback and were upset by unclear or unfavourable comments. A strong sense of inadequacy and stress of 'working under pressure' was revealed. They considered the writing–revising process, based on the supervisor's feedback, as overwhelming. They expected directive, specific, and consistent feedback.

The supervisory relationship tended to be apprentice and master. Supervisors were deemed as authority and students lacked a strong sense of ownership of their research. Students reported tensions and mismatches of expectations between students and supervisors.

A Thai student (F5) felt perplexed while 'receiving many question marks' in her written work. She expressed her desire for communicating directly with her supervisors: "I would like them to understand what I think about and give me a chance to express what I think about, or what I would do." However, coming from a culture where the supervisor has absolute authority in a hierarchical relationship, she was nervous and did not know how to openly communicate with her supervisor and seek clarification. She also encountered difficulties in conveying her ideas clearly in appropriate academic English in her discipline. The unconfident nature of her responses is indicated in the following comment.

> *"Because I don't know how to link it, I don't know how to organise my idea. I just make them together in one paragraph that has two or three ideas in one paragraph. I don't know how to separate it into the second one or the third one."*

Her overreliance on the supervisor had a devastating effect on her self-esteem. She followed her supervisor's feedback without much questioning. She was confused and frustrated when she was advised to restructure her thesis many times. She felt the writing–rewriting process was overwhelming, and her supervisor's feedback was opaque and unpredictable. She expected consistent, explicit, and directive feedback. The following comment suggests an inter-relationship between her stress about feedback and her dependence on her supervisor:

> *"I mean this framework is very good for me because I think I like to get 7 chapters in my thesis.*
> *You don't have to have 7 chapters in your thesis, just make it 5 or 6 that's enough; it depends on the information you have got in your hand.*
> *I understand that but when I follow them I change again. I don't know how to do this, 7 or 8 times for re-structuring…After I see my supervisor, you can see I was upset…"*

Besides the communication problem, there was a mismatch of expectations. The supervisor may expect this student to be an independent researcher, while she blamed her supervisor for not being helpful in 'locating references', 'providing clear feedback', or 'keeping promises'. She also expressed her feeling of isolation and lack of emotional support from her supervisor.

In a similar vein, another Thai student (F2) "got a headache", felt "confused' and "stressed", and may "lose confidence" when receiving negative feedback from her supervisor. She grappled with the formal/informal genre and Western convention of academic writing. A tension seemed to exist between this student and her supervisor. She complained that her supervisor's feedback concentrated on editing and correcting grammatical mistakes. Rather, she preferred feedback on content and structure. She also expected definitive or comprehensive directions from authorities:

> *"…because they know what they have experienced and they know what we have to do and they can do it."*

Likewise, a Muslim student (M1) commented on a mismatch of expectations. He had good oral communication ability and rich professional experience before embarking on his PhD thesis. However, when he presented his writing to his supervisor, "it became like crisis" and the feedback "was not helpful at all." He hoped his supervisor could consider his different industry, cultural and linguistic backgrounds and have realistic expectations.

> *"He wants me like writing straightforward like professionals. He's like somebody who has certain level and he wants everybody to come to his level to communicate with him. This is what he is doing, this is what is mismatching…He wants me to write according to his standard. I can't go inside his brain and take his skill."*

These three cases highlight the need for supervisors and students to communicate about approaches to academic writing and feedback strategies. Clear and full communication is an essential ingredient for effective feedback. Coming from cultures where the absolute authority of the teacher is emphasised, students may not know how to communicate openly with their supervisors, articulate their expectations and handle the possible tensions. Therefore, supervisors need to be sensitive to the cultural influences and understand the students' concerns. In order to provide culturally sensitive and constructive advice the supervisor's feedback must be attuned to the student's actual needs and framed appropriately so as to encourage critical thinking and revision, and academic development.

Inspired/confident tendency: Guide me through it!

Not all students had negative feedback experiences. The inspired/confident tendency was best represented by three students (M4, M2, and F4). These students tended to be inspired and determined. They demonstrated confidence in their academic writing and research capabilities. They expected supervisors to provide guidance, challenge and reshape their ideas. They took a proactive attitude, critically reflected on the feedback, and acted upon the advice they deemed as appropriate. They considered writing–rewriting as a dynamic, iterative, and transformative process. Students showed their understanding of knowledge as constructed during the thesis writing process rather than as information to be gathered and told by the supervisors. They developed their identity as an independent researcher and had a strong sense of responsibility for their research. The supervisory relationship focused on mentor and mentored. The students engaged in critical conversations with their supervisors and developed a good relationship. They also obtained emotional support from their supervisors.

A Chinese student (M4) commented on the important role of feedback in his thesis writing process. He already obtained a PhD degree in China and was pursuing his second PhD degree. He had a strong research background and felt quite confident about his research capabilities. In addition to critically reflecting on his supervisors' feedback, he had made full use of available resources to develop his academic writing capability, and he utilised additional communities of practice to strengthen his research. Another Chinese student (F4) had high self-esteem and emphasized her expectations of feedback.

> *"I don't want my supervisor to edit my thesis because I think their major supervision task is to give me a guideline or the structure…I need my supervisors to focus on the thinking, the research process, to make me more creative in doing the research rather than language."*

A Thai student (F1) compared different styles of supervision and the negotiation of power and authority between supervisor and student in Australia and Thailand. Her feedback experience showed her awareness of the cultural difference in supervisory relationship:

> *"In my country my supervisor will explain things, but in here I think I have to compare everything by myself first and then ask for suggestion on what I'm going to do. My supervisor has never said 'No, you can't do that, but you just try, if you want to do this it's ok.' Yeah, so I have to learn and prepare everything first……but in my country, if I do something and it's not correct and it cannot be done in practice, my supervisor will interrupt and say that 'do you think you can do that?'"*

Another Thai student (F6) shared a similar view and emphasised her supervisor's role as a mentor for her research and future career. She commented:

> *"He always told me that it's your work I just supervise you. He is like the mentor, but it is my work. I should be the decision maker and I know what I should or should not do."* She was grateful to him because *"he teaches me how to be a good academic too in the future."*

Having completed his thesis and reflecting on his feedback experience retrospectively, a Muslim student (M2) demonstrated his initiative and a strong sense of responsibility for his research. He commented:

> *"When I formed the structure of my thesis, I actually formed the structure by myself without consulting my supervisor."*

There was an emphasis upon critical conversations and the active role of the student in the writing process. He emphasised:

> *"Don't expect that your supervisors will ask you to do things. Do things by yourself first then you go and ask for further ideas and comments from them."*

He believed that the provision of guidance and emotional support enhances his confidence and academic capabilities. Coming from a culture where open criticism and direct critique are not encouraged, he learned to critically reflect on the feedback and took it in a positive way:

> *"And at one stage I felt those comments will give me kind of de-valuing my work, and …some comments were kind of discouragement…I got this feeling because of my cultural background. Probably in my culture we don't take criticism very much, if somebody criticises me I feel very upset. Then I thought no, no this is for the sake of my progress…I need to take it in a positive way rather than a negative way. So, this feeling helped me very much in forming or in shaping my writing.*

This study highlights cultural factors in receiving and reacting to critical feedback. In cultures where open criticism is avoided, students would find it difficult to face negative or critical comments in the feedback process. They need to adopt an open-minded and proactive attitude to such comments, and be aware of the Western culture of valuing critical thinking and critical analysis. Supervisors need to be sensitive in rendering critical feedback and give it in culturally appropriate manners. They need to offer clear guidelines and informative feedback

so that students can successfully meet their supervisors' expectations and observe Western academic conventions as well as challenge them (Ryan & Zuber-Skerritt, 1999).

Implications and conclusion

This paper reports a wide range of student experiences with supervisory feedback. It suggests that students who have high self-esteem and strong academic capabilities tend to have a proactive attitude towards critical feedback. Students with low levels of confidence and academic competence are vulnerable to unfavourable judgment. It confirms findings from previous research on the impact of emotional responses to feedback. The students in this study echoed the sentiments of previous research that the feedback process can be highly emotional and frustrating (e.g., Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Fiske, 1992; Lamott, 1994; Young, 2000). It is important to acknowledge their emotions, both positive and negative, as legitimate and healthy reactions, since they are developing the skills needed to become successful writers and independent researchers. This study also highlights the role of supervisors' feedback in helping students construct the emerging identity of a researcher. Supervisors need to develop a repertoire of feedback strategies to build students' confidence as well as to cater to the needs of different students at various phases of research.

This study suggests that good feedback relations represent a cooperative relationship. In the apprenticeship model of supervision, the student may adopt a position of passivity and let the supervisor direct the relationship. Feedback is accepted in an uncritical way, with students importing suggestions wholesale into the text. They place more confidence in the words of the 'master' than in their own ability to formulate acceptable text (Knowles, 1999). In the mentor model of supervision, students and supervisors engage in critical conversations. Feedback is accepted in a critical and reflective way, with students assuming responsibility for their research. By following directive feedback closely, students develop neither their cognitive nor their writing skills through their writing (Hyland, 2000). This study suggests the mentor model of supervision is more likely to lead to positive feedback experiences than the apprenticeship model. Students with low self-esteem or at the early stage of candidature tend to emphasise the authority of supervisors. Over time, students' initial nervousness and anxiety would give way to a sense of growth and confidence as a researcher.

This study is limited to the self-report of a small sample of international research students from one Australian university. The generalisation to students at other universities requires caution. Further study with a larger sample recruited from different universities will be significant in presenting a more comprehensive picture of international research students' feedback experiences in Australian higher education. It might also be illuminating to further examine the feedback process through observations, interviews with supervisors, and analysis of both oral and written feedback.

Despite its limitations, the students' voices revealed through this study provide insights into the pedagogical needs of international research students in postgraduate research supervision. We would suggest that supervisors listen to the voices of their students and frame feedback in an effective and culturally sensitive manner so as to enhance student learning and development in postgraduate research.

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